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## Saving the survivors: Yezidi women, Islamic State and the German Admissions Programme

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### Abstract

Brutality and sexual violence perpetrated by the Islamic State (IS) group against women and girls held in captivity have left traumatic effects on survivors and their communities. In this context, the German federal state of Baden-Württemberg launched a novel ‘Special Quota’ Humanitarian Admissions Programme to receive one thousand vulnerable women and children. They are predominantly from the Yezidi religious minority in Iraq and its autonomous Kurdistan Region. The programme serves as a noble precedent for new and expanded forms of international protection to those affected by conflict-related sexual violence and associated trauma. This article draws, however, on interviews with participants of the programme in order to consider critically the gendered assumptions embedded within its design, implementation and related discourse. Research findings indicate that explicit exclusion of all adult male family members from accompanying the vulnerable “womenandchildren”<sup>1</sup> to Germany is against the wishes and self-perceived best interests of some women survivors. Moreover, women’s inability to maintain family unity compounds their lack of agency to determine the conditions of their own recovery and future within the programme framework.

**Keywords:** Yezidi; women; SGBV; survivors; trauma; migration; Islamic State; ISIS.

### ABSTRACT IN KURMANJÎ

#### Xelaskirina yên saxmayî. Jinên êzidî, Dewleta Îslamî û bernameya Almanayê ya qebûlê

Weşet û şideta cinsî ya ji hêla Dewleta Îslamî pêk hatî li hember jin û keçên dîl tesîrên trawmatîk li ser ên xelasbûyî û li ser cemaetên wan hiştiye. Di vê çarçoveyê de, eyaleta Alman a Baden-Württemberg bernameyeke nû “Kotaya Taybet” a Bernameya Însanî ya Qebûlîrînê da destpêkirin da ku hezar jin û zarokên di rewşa hesas de qebûl bike. Ew ji bi piranî ji kêmineya olî ya êzidiyan pêk tên li Iraqê û li Herêma Otonom ya Kurdistanê. Bername wek pêşengeke hêja ye ji bo awayên nû û berfireh ên vehewandin û parastina navneteweyî ji wan kesan re ku ketine ber şideta seksî ya ji ber şer û trawmayên ji wê çêbûyî. Ev meqale xwe dispêre hevpeyvînên ligel beşdarên bernameyê ji bo ku bi awayekî rexneyî li wan pêşferzên cinsî yê di binyad û dizayn û tetbîq û gotara wê de. Encamên lêkolîne nîşan didin ku bi êşkerezeyî rênedana hemû endamên mîr ên malbatê da ligel “jin û zarokên” di rewşa hesas de werin Almanayê li dijî daxwaz û baştirîn feydeya (bi bawerîya wan) hin ji wan jinên xelasbûyî ye. Herwiha, zehmetiya jinan ji bo parastina yekîtiya malbatên xwe kêmasiya bikeriya wan ji xurtir dîke ku ew bi xwe karibin biryarê bigrin ji bo şert û mercên qencbûna xwe û dahatûya xwe di nav çarçoveya bernameyê de.

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<sup>1</sup> This article borrows the one-word compound term coined by feminist writer Cynthia Enloe to evoke the treatment of women within a conflated conceptual category of diminished personal agency and essentialised vulnerability.



## ABSTRACT IN SORANI

### **Rizgarkrdinî zîndûmawan, jinanî êzdî, Dewletî Îslamî û programî wergirtinî Ellmanî**

Ew wehşiyet û tundûtîjîye sêksîyey û ke le layen grupî Dewletî Îslamîyewe le dijî jinan û kiçanî be dilgraw hatote encam dan, karîgerîyî tirawmatîkî le ser zîndûmawan û komellgakanyan be cê hêştûwe. Lem kontêkste da wîlayetî fidirralîyî Baden Wurtembêrgî Ellmanya programêkî be nawî pişkî taybet (Special Quota) dest pê kird ke brîtîye le prrogramêkî xêrxwazîyî bo wergirtin, bo pêşwazîkirdin le yek hezar jin û mindallî brînbar. Zortirînyan ser be kemîney ayînî êzdîn le 'Îraq û herêmi Kurdistanin. Ew prrograme wek despêşxerîyekî nayab şwênî xoy kirdotewe bo brewdan be şewazî nwêtir û berfrawantirî parastinî nêwneteweyî bo ewaney ke kewtûnete jêr karîgerîyî tundûtîjîyî sêksî û ew tirawmayey ke bew hoyewe tûşyan bûwe. Le ser binemay çawpêkewtingelî encamdraw legell beşdarbûwanî programeke da em meqaleye be şeweyekî rexnegirane ew grîmane cenderîyane şî dekatewe ke le naw nawerrok û şewazî cêbecêkirdin û gutarî peywendîdar dan. Encamekanî lêkollinewe derî dexten ke xistinederî tewawî endame nêrinekanî xêzan ke hawşanî "jinan û mindallan"î brînbar birron bo Ellmanya le dijî wist û pêdawîstîye kesîyekanî hendêk le jine zîndumawekane. Herweha nebûnî twanayîyî ewey ke jinekan xêzanekanyan be yekgirtûwîyî bihêllinewe, rêga le karabûnyan degirêt le pêkhênanî mercekanî çareserî û dahatûyan le çwarçewey ew programe da.

## Introduction

“I came to Germany believing this programme would help me heal ... we were promised specialised treatment that is not available in our country ... so far I have been here for two years, and not received a single counselling session. I live alone and do not feel supported by anyone.” (Yezidi survivor in her late twenties.)

“Before I came here, I used to faint a lot. My treatment in Germany has really helped me feel stronger and much more comfortable. Now I am more confident.” (Yezidi survivor, early twenties.)

The two testimonies above are given by women formerly held captive by extremists proclaiming themselves as the Islamic State (IS). The women are Yezidis,<sup>2</sup> an ancient religious group originating from the Middle East's Kurdish heartlands. The Yezidi community, which constitutes a minority in modern-day Iraq and its autonomous Kurdistan Region (KRI),<sup>3</sup> has been one of the most severely and systematically persecuted groups since IS overran their native region of Sinjar<sup>4</sup> in August 2014. According to the United Nations, these targeted and pre-meditated atrocities amount to acts of genocide (UNHRC, 2016).

As well as the execution of adult males, the brutality and sexual violence inflicted upon women and children in captivity have had traumatic effects on survivors and their communities. Supporting recovery and social reintegration

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<sup>2</sup> In Kurdish, Êzîdî.

<sup>3</sup> The acronym KRI (Kurdistan Region of Iraq) is used to refer to the areas under the administration of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

<sup>4</sup> In Kurdish, Şengal/Shengal.

for those now living in displacement contexts in the KRI present challenges for families, communities, local government and humanitarian actors. It was in this context that Amnesty International advocated that “those who have escaped or been released must be provided with adequate and timely medical care and support services” (2014). The “Special Quota” (*Sonderkontingente*) Humanitarian Admissions Programme (HAP) of Germany’s Baden-Württemberg federal state (*Bundesland*), was adopted to receive one thousand vulnerable women and children from northern Iraq as a response to this acknowledged need. The initiative can be considered something of a rare experiment in terms of a humanitarian admissions programme for a) targeting internally displaced persons (IDPs) rather than registered refugees and b) being administered on the local (federal) level rather than by the central German government.

The testimonies of the two women presented above succinctly exhibit the diversity of experience described by participants in this unique programme. While the Baden-Württemberg initiative has clearly contributed positively to the lives of some of its participants, as with any humanitarian intervention, it is necessary to reflect carefully on the implications of how the programme ideologically frames and constructs its “beneficiaries”. Indeed, in line with the objective of Cynthia Enloe’s feminist enquiry into ethnic-nationalist conflict, this article seeks to “[roll back the] subsum[ing of] all women under the sprawling canopy of ‘victims’ that discourages observers from taking a close look at women’s varied experiences” (2004: 104).

A solid evidence base about women’s experiences within such admissions programmes as that of Baden-Württemberg is still emerging. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)’s 2013 report on resettlement for “women-at-risk” concludes that there is ongoing need for identification of best practices and “development of a shared view of what resettlement and integration success looks like” (UNHCR, 2013: 4). Existing literature, however, raises some concerns about the effectiveness of international reception programmes to address adequately the vulnerability of “women at risk”. In this vein, Manderson *et al.* argue that such a category of identification may work to perpetuate risk faced by women into post-resettlement settings (1998). Within the context presented above, this article adopts a critical perspective to explore the lessons that can be learned from the Baden-Württemberg programme as an example of responding to the needs of female survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.

Moreover, this study engages with the broader gendered dynamics prevalent within refugee support and humanitarian programmes, and particularly the question of agency exercised by women within the programme design, implementation and associated discourse. As early as three decades ago, anthropologist Barbara Harrell-Bond observed the tendency for humanitarian aid programmes to employ anti-participatory practices that have, in some cases, “placed an inordinate burden on many women which forced many of them to take decisions disruptive to their family life” (1987). Scholars have highlighted

how the image of refugees has been variously gendered since the end of the Cold War. Malkki, for instance, highlights a gendered shift with the portrayal of refugees' helplessness through the visual prominence of third world women and children by international institutions in order to raise public support (1996: 388; see also Johnson, 2011), with Gass adding that the "quintessential 'ideal refugee' should be docile, helpless, 'feminine', and thus controllable" (2014: 119-20).

The present article argues that the voices of female Yezidi survivors, whose victimhood is often largely sensationalised by the media (Allison & Buffon, 2016), highlight a number of (mostly gendered) assumptions that have salience for understanding the relations of women to war, trauma and recovery far beyond the boundaries of this specific programme. Situating the experiences of programme participants against the prevalent gendered dichotomy in popular discourse, framing asylum seekers arriving to Europe "illegally" as a masculine threat and refugees waiting patiently in camps of the global South as vulnerable, feminised subjects (Hyndman & Giles, 2011), demonstrates how such notions can be disempowering to the female survivors as well as their communities.

Traditionally, humanitarian admissions and resettlement programmes to the West have been reserved for those formally recognised as "Convention refugees", i.e. already outside their own country.<sup>5</sup> The Baden-Württemberg programme therefore sets an exceptional precedent as a vehicle for the formal movement of vulnerable internally displaced persons (IDPs), i.e. those still within their own country. Given this, especially at a time when worldwide IDP and overall displacement figures are at an all-time high (IDMC, 2016; UNHCR, 2016),<sup>6</sup> it is crucial to assess the ability of such a programme to serve the best interests of its participants. This pioneering humanitarian initiative is especially important as a case study given that other actors within the international community have embarked on their own resettlement or admissions programmes for demographically similar populations, and may look to the Baden-Württemberg programme as an example. Indeed, Canada and Australia have both launched programmes to resettle IDPs from Iraq, with Yezidi women and children well-represented among the beneficiaries.

Following efforts to learn lessons from the Baden-Württemberg programme, e.g. Canada's parliamentary Standing Committee session where organisers of the programme were invited to share their experiences (House of Commons, Canada, 2016),<sup>7</sup> reports about the "steep challenge [supporting Yezidi survivors presented] to the country's celebrated refugees settlement system" (e.g. Porter, 2018) have reignited debates among trauma professionals,

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<sup>5</sup> The 1951 Refugee Convention and its subsequent Protocol define a refugee as somebody who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted [...] is *outside* the country of his nationality [or habitual residence] and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (UNHCR, 2010). IDPs are those displaced within the own country.

<sup>6</sup> Respectively, worldwide figures at the end of 2015 were at 40.8 million for IDPs and 65.3 million for the overall displaced population, each the highest numbers on record.

<sup>7</sup> See also: Sevunts, 2016.

politicians and even the Yezidi community about how best to provide long-term support to such extremely vulnerable women, be it *in situ* in Iraq, or overseas. It is important, therefore, to hear directly from participants in the Baden-Württemberg programme, to understand their thoughts on the design, inclusion criteria and implementation of the programme, and the impact of all this on their recovery.

Another unique feature of the Baden-Württemberg initiative is that the humanitarian admissions programme is conducted on the federal level, rather than through the central government. Indeed, the programme was the first to exploit the provisions of German Residency Law and argue that a federal state had the right to manage a humanitarian admissions programme directly. This is a novel way for local authorities to show practical solidarity with persecuted communities. Such programmes can therefore be considered as a potential route to unlock access to humanitarian protection for a greater number of vulnerable people around the world. The uniqueness of the programme, on the one hand, combined with its considerable potential impact if replicated elsewhere, on the other, justify academic interest.

### **Methodological considerations**

The research undertaken for the present article contributes to the debates on the best approaches to support vulnerable IDPs, and especially female survivors of wartime sexual violence, to rebuild their lives at home or in new contexts. It also presents a relevant basis for more focused evaluation of the specifics relating to the Baden-Württemberg programme and others similar. To that end, the research draws on two main methods. Firstly, the review of media reports and official documents relating to the Baden-Württemberg programme provided useful background information. Secondly, interviews were conducted with programme participants and key informant stakeholders in both Kurdistan and Germany.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants of the Baden-Württemberg programme in Germany and in the Kurdistan Region (the latter during return visits of participants) in order to understand their experiences within the programme. Interview questions centred around a number of key themes: pre-departure situation in KRI; initial situation upon arrival to Germany; services and support available in KRI and Germany; safety and security; perceptions of personal wellbeing; future aspirations etc. In total, 17 interviews were conducted with programme participants or their family members in KRI while another 23 were held with participants in Germany, all between March and October 2017.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> While three interviews were held via electronic communication (WhatsApp), the rest were conducted through face-to-face interaction. Interviews with survivors and community members were mostly conducted in Arabic or Kurdish. All translations into English throughout this article are the author's own.

Throughout my research with the survivors of IS captivity, I have been concerned by the risk of “doing further harm”.<sup>9</sup> Besides following standard ethical guidance for interviews with survivors of sexual violence (e.g. WITNESS, 2013), I developed a “survivor-centred” interview approach where I posed open questions in order to allow the interviewee to determine the direction of the conversation and avoid feeling compelled to narrate potentially re-traumatising stories. While recognising that some Yezidi survivors and programme participants have explicitly opted to “speak out” publicly about their experiences, I have taken a methodological and ethical decision to anonymise fully the identity of all survivors interviewed in the interests of confidentiality and protecting relatives still held by IS. While I conducted these interviews as an independent researcher, I benefitted from two years of prior contextual knowledge having worked in a humanitarian capacity with displaced communities in Duhok Governorate, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (January 2015 - March 2017). Part of my work there had focused on streamlining the protection service response to survivors of IS captivity.

In addition to those with survivors, I conducted a number of interviews with key informants working with or alongside the programme. In KRI, these included representatives of the Yezidi religious administration, community activists, *mukhtars* (local community leaders), both KRI government and German Consulate General officials and humanitarian actors.<sup>10</sup> In Germany, I met with diaspora community volunteers, charity workers and officials associated with the programme. Particularly informative was a Skype interview conducted with the programme’s head psychologist, Dr Jan Ilhan Kizilhan, during March 2018. Such exchanges were all extremely helpful to triangulate information and further my understanding of the programme aims and the context of its inception and implementation.

The underlying political assumptions exposed within the programme design and discourse are examined in light of feminist and gender constructivist literature dealing with themes of war and conflict, migration and displacement, and trauma and recovery. Withstanding the limitations due to my position as an external researcher with no involvement in individual case management, this article delivers crucial and to date unheard perspectives on the Baden-Württemberg Humanitarian Admissions Programme, as well as reflecting more generally on the challenges in supporting recovery for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, especially in the context of a conservative and strictly endogamous community facing existential threat.

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<sup>9</sup> The imperative of “Do[ing] no harm” is accepted as a fundamental protection principle in any humanitarian response (Sphere Project, 2013) and best practice of working with survivors of sexual violence.

<sup>10</sup> The latter were mostly German NGOs, those providing Psycho-Social Support (PSS) and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) response activities, as well as the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

## Background on the Baden-Württemberg Programme

The persecutions against the Yezidis of Sinjar that began on 3 August, 2014, can be described as “gendered” in the sense that IS victimised boys, men, women and girls in strikingly different ways. While they killed men on the spot when they refused to convert to Islam, pre-pubescent boys were detained and later indoctrinated to commit atrocities while forcibly conscripted into IS’s fighting squads. Women and girls were held and traded as slaves, and subjected to wartime sexual violence, including systematic rape (OHCHR & UNAMI, 2016). Members of all age and gender groups experienced torture, as well as other degrading and humiliating treatment. According to initial (and most likely conservative) estimates, up to 200,000 Yezidis were displaced as a result of the Sinjar attack, with the majority eventually settling in the Duhok Governorate of the Kurdistan Region.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, a survey conducted by the Directorate of Yezidi Affairs identified some 6,430 persons as missing in the direct aftermath of the events.<sup>12</sup> The majority were women and children.

While thousands of Yezidis remained missing, the director of the Kidnap Affairs Office in Duhok, Hussein al-Qaedi, confirmed that by March 2015 more than 900 individuals had been rescued or escaped from IS captivity (Ciziri, 2015). Some returning survivors escaped by their own means, although the majority were rescued through the intervention of smuggler-coordinators and the indirect facilitation of the governmental Kidnap Affairs Office.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes the family paid an agreed-upon ransom sum, which was reimbursed by the Office following the release of the survivor, although other families have incurred significant debt to bring back their relatives. Returning female survivors are often particularly psychologically vulnerable. Some have witnessed the killing of family members and torture of their children, or were kept underground in crowded buildings and deprived of food. Having lost key family members, they often struggle to adapt to the post-captivity environment of IDP camps where they may be subject to social stigmatisation in their conservative communities as a result of the sexual abuse and enforced marriage by IS members during captivity.

Recognising this reality, the Central Council of Yezidis in Germany (*Zentralrat der Yeziden in Deutschland*) and the wider diaspora community began to advocate for urgent support to women and children who had lost their husbands and fathers. Institutions that had emerged within the Yezidi diaspora, particularly in Germany, with the goal of spreading awareness about Yezidi culture (Ackermann, 2004), quickly turned their attention towards this cause. Sanders’ recent research also highlights how Yezidi diaspora activists and their

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<sup>11</sup> This figure is taken from a factsheet by REACH Initiative (2014). A later UN report cites a figure of 360,000 displaced Yezidis (OHCHR & UNAMI, 2016). Further details on the sequence of displacement and the distribution of Yezidi IDPs across Duhok governorate can be found in Dulz’s work published in the *Kurdish Studies* special edition on the Yezidis (2016).

<sup>12</sup> Figure provided by the Kidnap Affairs Office, Duhok.

<sup>13</sup> This Office was set up under the initiative of Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region, Nechirvan Barzani.

allies have employed such narratives of victimhood to lobby to secure increased mobility for Yezidi refugees to the West (2017). As a result, following the State's Refugee Summit on 14 October 2014, Baden-Württemberg Minister-President Winfried Kretschmann announced the adoption of a 95 million Euro "Special Quota" Humanitarian Admissions Programme to accept a thousand vulnerable women and children from Northern Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

The programme represents an important and pragmatic expression of international solidarity with those who suffered at the hands of the Islamic State extremists, underscoring the refugee and social policies advocated by Kretschmann's Green Party (*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*).<sup>15</sup> According to the official programme description, the scheme was "designed to support the Kurdish and Iraqi efforts to cope with the current hardships" and can be understood as a burden-sharing initiative, given the inability of local infrastructure to respond to the overwhelming needs (SMBW, 2016a).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, in media coverage of the programme, its organisers frequently emphasise the insufficiency of psychological treatment and services available for survivors in Iraq as the justification for relocating the women and children to Germany. Moreover, programme spokespersons repeatedly mention that the psychological condition of some women was so severe that transfer out of Iraq was considered to be a life-saving intervention.

The first movement of survivors to Germany took place in March 2015, and by January of the next year a thousand women and their dependent children had been settled across 22 municipalities in Baden-Württemberg. Additionally, the two *Bundesländer* (federal states) of Niedersachsen (Lower Saxony) and Schleswig-Holstein took in 67 and 32 individuals respectively (SMBW, 2016b). According to the programme's chief psychologist, Kizilhan, participants in the programme were thus those who 1) had been in IS captivity; 2) were suffering psychological and/or medical consequences while in displacement in the KRI, and 3) were deemed to be able to benefit from specialised treatment in Germany (Ayed, 2017). Elsewhere, the head of the programme, Dr Blume, gives a different third criterion as those who "had broken family structures," adding that "[i]f the family was intact, if the husband was available, normally we wouldn't choose people to come then" (House of Commons, 2016: 5).<sup>17</sup> While primarily targeting Yezidi women and their accompanying children under the age of 18, the programme reportedly also included a small number of participants from other minority groups persecuted by IS.

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<sup>14</sup> The full name of the programme is the *Sonderkontingente für besonders schutzbedürftige Frauen und Kinder aus dem Nordirak*.

<sup>15</sup> In Baden-Württemberg, Kretschmann became the first Green politician to serve as Minister-President of a German federal state. The *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* have campaigned for a 'rights-based' refugee policy, putting the individual asylum seeker at the centre of the process.

<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg for sharing some project documents in response to e-mail correspondence.

<sup>17</sup> This discrepancy will be addressed in the second half of this article.



The programme was formally based on a joint declaration of intent (*Absichtserklärung*) between the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg and the Kurdistan Regional Government, with logistical support provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The latter's role was to facilitate transportation, provide cultural orientation and clothing vouchers ahead of travel, as well as medical and psychological support prior to and during travel (IOM & SMBW, 2016: 8). The agency also made special arrangements for each of the participants to visit the Lalish sanctuary, the holiest temple for the Yezidi community, where religious leaders (re-)affirmed the women in the faith before travelling (IOM, 2015). Once in Germany, participants were entitled to receive free psychological and health care, accommodation, financial support, as well as German language and other educational courses.

To lead programme implementation, the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg commissioned Dr Michael Blume, an expert in Religious Studies. He then appointed two programme coordinators from the Yezidi community in Germany: Dr Mirza Dinayi and Dr Jan Ilhan Kizilhan, both of whom are recognised as playing key roles in the development of the Yezidi diaspora in Germany (Ackermann, 2003: 170-1). Dr Dinayi is a physician and Yezidi activist who has lived in Germany since the 1990s. His organisation, Air Bridge Iraq (*Luftbrücke Irak*) was set up in 2007 to provide treatment to emergency medical cases in Iraq, particularly following the deadly bombings that targeted Sinjar's Yezidi community that year. Alongside other NGOs and churches, it was involved in the initial identification of potential participants for the Baden-Württemberg programme (House of Commons, 2016: 3; SMBW, 2016b). Dr Kizilhan is an established psychological practitioner and academic, descendent of the Yezidi community in Turkey.<sup>18</sup> Initially working as an advisor to the programme, Kizilhan later served as its chief psychologist, and personally interviewed some 1400 women as part of the participant selection process during trips to KRI. He describes his own role: "to psychologically examine people in Northern Iraq as well as to offer vocational training focusing on Yezidi cultural background and transcultural aspects, for the treatment, care and consultation of traumatised people in several cities of Baden-Württemberg" (Omarkhan, 2016: 151).

Despite the commendable aims of the Baden-Württemberg venture, critics have labelled it as "more PR than a [well] thought-through idea" (Järkel, 2014),<sup>19</sup> pointing out that timely practical preparations had not been made in order to receive the women. Indeed, Kizilhan himself echoes this reality when commenting frankly that, "[w]e had few plans or ideas, basically just a decision to bring 1,000 people to Germany" (Sands, 2015). In light of the self-acknowledged "experimental" nature of the project (with its relatively short

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<sup>19</sup> In German: "*Mehr PR als eine durchdachte Idee*".

design phase in order to provide a rapid response for the participants), this article considers some of the potentially troubling assumptions implicit in the programme design, implementation and discourse.

### Variation of experience

“I have seen much benefit. They gave us our own house. I have attended school. For me, school is better than a psychologist. What Germany did for me was very big. Nobody else has done such a thing for us. It was really big.” (Yezidi survivor, aged 19)

During conversations with women participants in the programme, they presented interesting perspectives on adjusting to life in Germany as well as reflecting on their involvement. It was striking to notice the variation of experience, both in terms of descriptions of services received and the women’s own assessments of their wellbeing. Some, like the young, unmarried survivor in Stuttgart quoted above, presented narratives of remarkable personal transformation and integration into German society. Those with serious medical conditions expressed clear gratitude for operations undergone in Germany, highlighting that necessary treatment was sometimes simply unavailable in Kurdistan.

Meanwhile, life in Germany has provided an opportunity for some participants in the programme to take charge of their lives, assert their independence, and even sometimes to establish public advocacy profiles for themselves, something that would have been almost unimaginable back in the conservative, patriarchal context of Kurdistan. The best-known example of this is Nadia Murad, now the first United Nations Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking. Her high-profile activities exemplify how the diaspora context can “offer Yezidis the possibility of the creativity and reflexivity of an independent and enriching life” (Ackermann, 2003: 167).<sup>20</sup> This, however, also comes with the realisation that there is sometimes community pressure or a sense of uncomfortable duty to ensure that the story of the Yezidi genocide is heard.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, one Yezidi survivor in Germany told me how she felt nervous that a Facebook page in her name was being operated by a group of activists without her having control over the posted content.

While women with more severe psychological conditions had generally benefitted from specialist care in Germany, other survivors complained that

<sup>20</sup> In German: “den Yeziden die Möglichkeit der Kreativität beziehungsweise Reflexivität eines eigenständigen und bereichernden Lebens bietet.”

<sup>21</sup> One of the international staff involved in facilitating the transfer of the women to Germany recalled the challenges when occasionally journalists arrived on the scene, be it at the hotel where the women were staying or during the visit to Lalish sanctuary while they were preparing the women for departure: “Some of the women clearly wanted to talk to the media, but we had to make sure that it was clear that this was in no way an expectation of participation in the programme. Due to such misconceptions, we really focused on this during cultural orientation.”

they had not received a single counselling session since arriving in the country. This may be partially explained by the lack of local capacity available (in terms of interpreters and social workers), especially given the demand on services following the large migrant/refugee influx since 2015. Nonetheless, it is somewhat ironic that a programme premised on the provision of intensive psychological support unavailable in Kurdistan has, in certain cases, failed to deliver these services. According to Kizilhan, only about one third of participants were deemed ready to begin therapy, noting that some, particularly older women, are reticent to engage in healing practices that appear “too foreign” (2017a: 337). It is possible that some of the women have misconceptions about what psychological treatment entails, increasing the need for cultural-sensitive approaches to recovery.

There also appears to be significant variation in the standards and kinds of housing provided to survivors and their accompanying family members. While the programme description asserts that women are accommodated in “a secured and separate building for the beneficiaries only, in order to reduce possible re-traumatization if they lived together with foreign male refugees” (SMBW, 2016a), it is clear that in reality participants experienced a diverse range of living situations. In contrast to those who were accommodated in comfortable, detached houses (or even villas), one woman shared with me her sense of isolation living alone in a camp-like setting alongside young male refugees from other nationalities. Others felt stigmatised through their accommodation in the annex of a psychiatric hospital in Stuttgart. “Youths shout that we are crazy and throw things at the building,” said one such woman. Speaking to Dr Kizilhan, he confirmed that establishing standards of accommodation has proved challenging: “each of the participating municipalities committed to host a number of survivors according to available options. Some had little more than an old school or hospital building.” He added that the 2015 refugee influx has increased demand on municipal housing and explained that lack of available accommodation is a problem affecting Germany more generally.<sup>22</sup>

A more frequent complaint was that the participants of the programme were dispersed across the large area of Baden-Württemberg with little consideration for keeping sisters and other relatives in proximity to one another. Two sisters living hours away from each other described how they had repeatedly pleaded to be relocated closer together, while acknowledging that the authorities have responded positively to other similar requests. Additionally, a number of women explained that the *Heimat* (residence) where they were staying was a kind of convent run by nuns who sometimes did not permit them to go out or receive visitors. These women generally regretted that this cut off their contact with the large Yezidi diaspora community in Germany, a potentially valuable source of support given that some Yezidis who came to Germany during the

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<sup>22</sup> Skype interview in March, 2018.

migration of the 80-90s are now well integrated. They considered it unfair that they were unable to have the same kind of access to the diaspora community as some other participants. While generally the situation depended on the particular *Heimat*, these women explained that they had not anticipated encountering such restrictions in Germany.

Given the acknowledged ambivalence of diaspora contexts in fostering both the freedom of “a potential creativity” and challenges associated with “exile and displacement” (Ackermann, 2004: 163; see also Mamo, 2013), the variation of experience narrated by Yezidi survivors is perhaps unsurprising. Notable, however, is that older, and especially married, women tended to report their situation in less positive terms. For example, one such woman complained bitterly that “after [the programme] did not let my husband come with me from Iraq, he paid a smuggler and came here to apply for asylum. Now that he is here, [those running the *Heimat*] still won’t let me see him.” In such cases, the patriarchal restrictions of the Yezidi community in Kurdistan have ironically been replaced by an institutional paternalism that deprives women from making their own choices. Such anti-participatory practices fetishise women as unthinking victims in need of “saving.”

Many of the women in Germany mentioned that from the beginning of the programme few decisions were fully within their control. For example, some explained a sense of being compelled to participate in the programme for the opportunity it would provide their children, or that their husbands encouraged them to go to Germany. Others said that while they would really like to return to Kurdistan, they now feel obliged to stay for their children and in order to eventually (hopefully) have their husbands come and join them. The conflation of “womenandchildren” into a single category of extreme vulnerability that features so prominently in the discourse surrounding the programme is further reflected through the diminished agency afforded to the women in determining their everyday situation (Enloe, 2004).

### **“Womenandchildren” only design**

Here it is interesting to examine the basis for exclusion of adult men from participation in travel to Baden-Württemberg, and by extension in the healing process for the female survivors the programme aims to support. Indeed, the complaint that husbands and adult sons were unable to accompany the women was consistently heard during my interviews with participants. Likewise, a journalist who covered the programme from both Duhok and Germany stated that this was “the one complaint about the program many of the women raised to me.” (Whyte, 2016). This article considers three main factors as contributing to and possibly explaining the “women-only” design of the Baden-Württemberg programme, each bringing implications for the gendered construction of the Yezidi survivor: i) dominant discourse on female victimisation; ii) perceptions about the optimal conditions for women’s

recovery, and iii) structural limitations informed by wider migration dynamics and discourse in Germany.

### **Powerful narratives of women's suffering**

It is important to recognise that during the inception and design phase of the programme, media narratives of the Sinjar crisis made recourse to powerful humanitarian images of “[w]omen mourning the loss of husbands, sons and fathers” (Johnson, 2011: 1015), a motif effectively capitalised on by Yezidi activists to advocate for action from German officials. As such, there may have been to some extent a genuine assumption that the most vulnerable profiles among the target community were those who, as Blume has later stated, “had lost their male relatives to the genocide” (House of Commons, 2016: 2). Perhaps this assumption was fair at the time of programme inception given the reports of IS massacring Yezidi men.

In parallel, the emergence of the “survivors” as a new category of humanitarian aid beneficiaries, with the distributions of several NGOs specifically targeting this sub-group within the displaced community, has encouraged such individuals to self-identify with a definition based solely on their traumatic experiences as women held in captivity. Interestingly, in practice the term “survivors” refers exclusively to women (and girls) in the vocabulary of both the humanitarian and Yezidi communities in Iraq, the latter employing the plural, feminine Arabic term *najiyat*. It is plausible that foregrounding the narratives of female suffering in media and diaspora advocacy narratives contributed to making the presence of husbands in some cases somewhat invisible. History since the 2003 US invasion, however, warns that rhetoric “put[ting] Iraqi women at centre stage” does not necessarily serve to improve the lives of women in the country (Al-Ali, 2016: 5-6).

In the event, the “sudden appearance” of husbands to some of the women selected, screened and processed to travel to Germany complicated pre-departure procedures.<sup>23</sup> As one UN representative noted, “this was a huge issue that the programme faced and it created much confusion among the community.” When informed that they would have to travel without their husbands and adult sons, women began to hesitate and some decided not to participate in the programme as a result. The essentialisation of the survivor’s helplessness in humanitarian and media discourses has arguably shaped responses that present the women with new dilemmas and risk further perpetuating their vulnerability. While accepting the disproportionate impacts of displacement and war upon women, in addition to the structural and social disadvantages faced by survivors in Iraqi/Kurdish society, a prescriptively “women-only” approach may not be the best to support survivors and their communities.

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<sup>23</sup> This observation was shared by a number of staff working with UN agencies and humanitarian actors in Duhok during 2014-15.

### **Better alone?**

A second possibility is that men were excluded based on programmatic considerations relating to externally perceived optimal conditions for the women's psychological recovery. It is acknowledged that some women who have endured wartime sexual violence and forced marriage may suffer rejection and ostracism upon return to their family. Furthermore, Yezidi society is strictly governed by conservative, endogamous codes where women carry the burden of family "honour" and "shame" (Kreyenbroek, 2009: 51-6). Amnesty International describes the ambivalent situation that some survivors face when "[t]heir relatives are their only source of support, but because of stigma and shame, they do not feel able to share with them what happened, or to seek their help in accessing the services they urgently need" (2014: 14). As such, some survivors may find liberating opportunities for recovery in the diaspora outside the stifling constraints of their nuclear and extended family. Indeed, Kizilhan stressed that at the time of setting up the programme the community's reaction to those returning from captivity was still not clear: "we did not know if these women would be accepted back into their communities."<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, in the aftermath of the IS attack on Sinjar, the Yezidi community, both collectively and as affected individuals, was left in a state of social and religious crisis. As well as having to adapt ritual activities due to loss of access to the sacred landscape in Sinjar (Spät, 2016: 170-3), it faced the dilemma of how to respond to returning survivors given that the faith is based on strict prohibitions of marriage and sexual relations with non-Yezidis. Traditionally, women seen to have transgressed these parameters were cast outside the community and often ostracised by their family. The exceptional declaration by the religious leadership in early 2015 to confirm female survivors as Yezidis in good standing did much to support their reintegration back into the community. The transformation of Yezidi society, and individual mindsets, coming to terms with the 2014 genocide, is still in process.

Globally, there is scarce literature on the role (positive or negative) that non-perpetrator husbands or intimate partners can play in women's recovery from traumatic sexual violence. While it may be too early to form conclusions on the Yezidi case, it was striking during my interviews with survivors in Baden-Württemberg how often the desire to be reunited with a husband left behind in Duhok came up and was emphasised as of central importance. "I am broken without my husband here. I need him with me so I can be comfortable," said one woman, while another stressed, "we are not like German people who can get divorced easily and the children leave home at 18. For us, if the family dies, we all die." As such, the forced separation of family members by the programme may be conceived of as "secondary isolation" and perpetuation of damage done by IS to the Yezidi family structure and social fabric, whereby men, women, boys and girls were systematically segregated within a context of

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<sup>24</sup> Skype interview in March, 2018.

genocidal persecution (for details, see UNHRC, 2016). In such cases, interventions to support the post-genocidal recovery of survivors need to be sensitive to the linkages between family unity and individual wellbeing, a theme that commonly emerged during interviews with programme participants.

The importance of keeping family unity intact was illustrated by one of the oldest women I encountered. A social worker in Stuttgart explained in desperation that it had become routine to receive phone calls from the Yezidi woman in the middle of the night, with the latter crying and screaming hysterically. “She has nightmares that prevent her from sleeping”, the social worker explained. “She fears that her husband will forget her while she is in Germany.” This woman herself later explained to me, “how can I heal when I don’t know what he is thinking? I spent seven months in the hands of IS. Then after a few weeks back with him, they brought me here to Germany. Now I speak with him every day on the phone, but he seems so distant. If I hear rumours that he has another woman, I think I will kill myself.” Another participant in the programme echoed the strain that separation has put on her marital relationship, stating that, “it is not because I am a weak woman that I need my husband ... no, it is our culture that we cannot feel happy [*rabet* – literally ‘comfortable’] unless the family is complete”.

While the distance Germany provides from potentially “triggering” reminders of previous traumatic experiences may be helpful to the women’s recovery (e.g. away from constant and unsettling references to the Islamic State in Arab and Kurdish media),<sup>25</sup> several participants noted that the presence of their husband and male adult sons would make them feel safer and more confident to adapt to life in Germany. One woman contrasted how she had moved from an all-Yezidi camp in KRI, where she felt integrated within the community, to a housing residence for refugees in Germany where she is alone and the only Yezidi while other families have their male relatives. “I never go outside. I am scared to walk alone with all these strangers and I have nobody.” Two Yezidi activists whom I met explained that they try to visit this woman as regularly as possible, recognising her vulnerability and loneliness. “When I first saw her,” one of them explained, “she believed that she was being punished for losing her ‘honour’ in captivity. We were trying to have her relocated but without success. I speak with her husband back in Iraq who is very worried about her”.

The difficulty to establish and rebuild trust in a new environment appears to be magnified by the fact that some of the women feel deprived of their family support. They are “often suspicious of those responsible for their daily wellbeing, especially social workers and doctors”, notes Blume (IOM & SMBW, 2016: 32). It is important here to recognise that many women in Sinjar were largely reliant upon their husbands, fathers and other male relatives to take care of daily tasks (e.g. handling money or engaging with bureaucracy). While taking

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<sup>25</sup> One girl stated in interview: “It is good to be away from my enemies. Here I see new things on TV – not only explosions and the fight against IS”.

on new responsibilities in Germany can be liberating for some, other women and girls have found the situation overwhelming. One girl who was twelve years old when she escaped from IS, and came to Germany with an aunt, made her own way back to Iraq “to feel safe again among uncles and cousins”.

Professor Kizilhan’s own academic work highlights the need for a conducive environment for psychological treatment, “in which the person does not feel at threat of persecution or other dangers.” He adds that “stability, security, orientation, self-value and intimacy” are essential elements for the individual’s recovery from trauma (2017a: 338-9).<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere he recognises the importance of family involvement as a resource in both diagnosis and treatment of trauma, especially for people from family-oriented communities or “traditional-collective cultures”, such as the Yezidis: “Families support [...] relieving behaviour, thereby reinforcing the secondary gain from illness” (2017b: 2-3).

With Kizilhan arguing elsewhere that these women suffer not only from individual, but also collective and trans-generational trauma (Kizilhan & Noll-Hussong, 2017), it could be argued that forms of family therapy might be the best approach for some such cases. This could include marriage counselling in order to aid the women to re-establish normal family relations, especially with their estranged husbands, following IS captivity. Indeed, research in other contexts has touched on the important role support from non-perpetrator husbands can play in de-stigmatising women after incidents of rape (Kelly et al, 2011), though further work is required to explore factors determining the husband’s response in such situations. Still, in some cases, positive involvement of family in treatment plans, especially during the early stages of recovery, may help the survivor to “normalise” her routine and overcome feelings of “shame”.

However, within the course of this research, I came across nothing to indicate that the programme organisers conducted individual “best interests” assessments to determine the likely impacts of inclusion/exclusion of men upon the women and children’s wellbeing.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, all of the women interviewed (including those who are themselves unmarried), urged that males should be allowed to accompany women when this is desired by the latter. As one woman said in interview, “our men have suffered and are survivors too”. She explained how her husband lay motionless on the ground as IS shot dead those around him during the notorious Kocho massacre on 15 August 2014, adding: “We need to be there for each other now”. Given the above, it is somewhat strange that the programme categorically excludes the possibility of

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<sup>26</sup> In German: “in der sich die Person nicht von Verfolgung oder anderen Gefahren bedroht fühlt” [...] “Stabilität, Sicherheit, Orientierung, Selbstwert und Intimität”.

<sup>27</sup> It is worth highlighting that the right to family life and unity is recognised within international law, while its preservation where possible is accepted as a general principle and best practice within refugee resettlement schemes (UNHCR, 2011). Maintaining family unity is considered among the criteria for Resettlement/Admissions cases to Germany according to the admission orders (*Aufnahmeanordnung*) set by the Federal Ministry of the Interior, e.g. for the Humanitarian Admissions Programmes receiving Syrian refugees (Grote et al. 2016: 25).



male adult relatives within the nuclear family from accompanying the women to Germany. Policies of accepting only women and children with no regard to the vulnerability of male adult family members, nor the mutual support male and female spouses may provide to each other, seem somewhat short-sighted in view of serving the best interests of female survivors, as well as their communities.

When interviewed in the informal settlement for IDPs on the edge of Ba'dre, one of the husbands left behind in Kurdistan explained, "I supported my wife to go [to Germany] as I thought it would be good for our future as a family, but I didn't expect it would be so difficult. I thought we would be back together by now. She is really struggling and I regret encouraging her to go". For his part, he is living in the tent of another family in a camp having lost his father and all four of his brothers when IS attacked Tel Qasab village. He has not seen his three children since they left for Germany two years ago, and struggles with debt having paid a large ransom for their release. In such situations, separation puts an immense pressure on the entire family. The man explained that his wife has contracted a private lawyer in Germany to try and expedite family reunification, but as yet with no results, while "those who reached Germany illegally in 2015 have been able to bring their wives and husbands". Many programme participants appear to have initially understood that family reunification could be initiated after the two-year programme of treatment had been completed.<sup>28</sup> In practice, however, there is much uncertainty about this among the community, with some women saying that they have been informed that the programme has been extended for a third year.

Moreover, the women and their close relatives back in Duhok often find themselves left in a psychologically challenging state of limbo due to the unclear programme status. One woman summed up the situation: "we have been here almost three years now and still don't know when we will be free to move in Germany outside Baden-Württemberg, and bring our husbands from Iraq. Until now there is no plan. Nothing is clear". While programme organisers confirmed that women can apply for permanent residency and then submit a claim for family reunification from the end of 2018 (i.e. after the programme has completed its third year),<sup>29</sup> participants remained unclear on the details. Also unclear is whether the Baden-Württemberg programme seeks to provide a durable solution like traditional Resettlement programmes, or simply temporary protection for the duration of treatment. While Blume has suggested that the programme was consciously designed to serve a hybrid function, "a mix between an emergency program, where you help people and then they go

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<sup>28</sup> It is noted that those entering Germany under a Humanitarian Admissions Programme are generally awarded a two-year residence permit in accordance with the German Residency Act (Grote et al. 2016: 5-6). Indeed, official documents confirm that residency is initially provided for a two-year period with expected conversion into permanent status thereafter (German Federal Parliament, 2017: 50).

<sup>29</sup> Skype interview with Kizilhan in March, 2018.

back, and a resettlement program, where they come and stay”, allowing the participants to “plot their own futures” (Feldman, 2017), many women I interviewed considered the structural uncertainty of the programme to be a source of unsettling anxiety and distress. “Maybe I will not be able to stay here. Or maybe if I stay I cannot bring my husband and two sons”, said one woman. “Sometimes this makes me think the only way to have stability and recover is to go back to the camp in Duhok.”

Such situations have apparently generated considerable reflection from the programme organisers. Speaking to Kizilhan, it is clear that he conceives the Baden-Württemberg programme to be a very specific “crisis intervention” designed for only the most vulnerable in the immediate aftermath of the IS attack. As a trauma expert, he realises the importance of projects to support affected individuals within their own societies: “Ordinarily, it doesn’t make sense to take people out of their communities. Nobody wants to leave their country, but there is a need for stability”. Perhaps as a response to lessons learned from the Special Quota programme, Baden-Württemberg has made a welcome 11 million Euro investment and set up an Institute for Psychotherapy and Psychotraumatology at the University of Duhok (Wetzel, 2017). Kizilhan explains that this is an idea he had been thinking about since 2006, particularly in order to support the survivors of Halabja and Anfal, “but following the Special Quota programme it was easier to convince all involved of the need for this project”.<sup>30</sup>

### **Gendered vulnerability and migration discourse**

Finally, the exclusion of men from accompanying the identified vulnerable women and children may be linked to the reproduction of certain normative gender notions, including the prevalent perception of migrant men as a political and security threat for the West. Blume’s presentation of the programme design appears to be shaped by such gendered stereotypes when he explains that “those who are reaching Europe at the moment are mainly young men and those with enough money to pay the traffickers. We must help those who need it most first. The strong and healthy are able to attempt the journey, while the weak and the women alone with children are not able to do so – so that is why our mission is vital” (Whyte, 2016). This rhetoric not only buys into the essentialising images of women as infantilised victims dependent upon external protection, glossing over what they may actually want; it also renders men as undeserving of the same protections.

Blume’s justification for the programme design is further revealing, when he comments that “ISIL [an alternative acronym for IS] specifically targets *women and children* and Baden-Württemberg has no army to fight it. This

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<sup>30</sup> Skype interview in March, 2018. During interviews, many of the participants stressed the distinction between the programme and its representatives, whom they tended to view with affection. For example, one woman stated: “I have many problems here in Germany, but he [Blume] is like a father to us all. We respect him and he likes us. When he comes to our celebrations, all the children run towards him at once.”

[programme] is an appropriate response, a *war* with peaceful means and with the victims' well-being at its heart" (IOM & SMBW, 2016: 30-32). His language here, perhaps unconsciously, borrows from the rhetorical instrumentalisation of the vulnerable "brown" woman in order politically to justify recent neo-imperial military interventions, e.g. in Afghanistan and Iraq (Abu-Lughod, 2002). In following the fate of the Yezidi women held by IS, it is notable that this renewed public attention breaks the "conspiracy of near silence about the increasing violence against women" in post-invasion Iraq at a time when international military operations are once again taking place (Al-Ali & Pratt, 2011: 258). Women are as such treated as exemplary of the enemy's brutality and as potential figures of salvation by the altruistic foreigner.

While cautious to maintain the distinction between the Baden-Württemberg programme as a charitable venture targeting participants on a voluntary basis and the violent occupation of foreign lands, resources and people by Western militaries, it is important to note that the two share a focus on women's human rights and suffering presented through the powerful ideological prism of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak, 1993: 93). Focus on the superficial "hyper visibility of the Yezidi woman's suffering", as noted by Allison and Buffon, leaves the Yezidi male "survivor" largely invisible (2016), or worse conflated with the perpetrator of violence. Indeed, one of the female survivors in Germany spoke directly to this sentiment during the interview. She was critical of the programme, saying "IS tortured me, not my husband. Why does Germany keep him from me? He is a good man, not like IS".

Thus, the sex-selective design of the Baden-Württemberg programme builds upon dominant and mutually-reinforcing gender constructions where femininity is associated with vulnerability, i.e. the innocent victim-figure, and masculinity is bound to violence, i.e. the militia fighter (Enloe, 2014: 107). It is possible that Blume's remarks above constitute a *post-facto* argument, crystallised in light of growing anti-migration rhetoric in Germany, especially after reports of attacks on German women in Cologne, allegedly by men with migrant/refugee profiles, on New Year's Eve 2015/16. In all cases, men's position as problematic and demonised migrants in the public conscience may have *obliged* programme leaders to implement according to such prescriptive norms. With pervasive distrust of young, non-white males in migration discourse, it would likely be easier to receive the necessary political and popular approval for a "women and children only" programme. Similarly, the crudely gendered logic that men cannot be innocent civilians governs the reluctance of Western states to resettle single Syrian men at risk (Turner, 2016) and even the insistence on "women and children first" policies in humanitarian evacuations in situations where men face the greatest risk of execution (Carpenter, 2003: 679). Ironically, the exclusion of husbands from accompanying their wives in cases where the couple wishes to live together incentivises men to undertake dangerous travel in the name of "family unity".

Blume's comments affirm the gendered ideas entrenched within asylum and migration discourses, that of the de-humanised, male asylum seeker proactively and illegally migrating to Europe against the feminised portrayal of refugees patiently awaiting orderly resettlement from their regions of origin (Hyndman & Giles, 2011: 363). He argues that the Baden-Württemberg programme subverts the dynamic of illegal migration in the interests of the most vulnerable by providing a legal and safe pathway to Europe for women and children (who otherwise would most likely not have had opportunity to travel). Indeed, this is an advantage of all managed migration initiatives. However, addressing the gender imbalance within the migrant/refugee demographic in Germany by explicitly excluding all adult men from the programme is insensitive to the vulnerabilities of the participants and their wider community. The prescribed splitting up of family members who wish to stay together is likely to decrease the individual resilience of both those who leave and stay, not to mention the important resource of "family resilience" to cope with trauma.

This article has presented how the terms of both Yezidi diaspora advocacy and prevalent migration discourse have shaped the design and implementation of the Baden-Württemberg programme. It is interesting to note that a programme for vulnerable women and children (and excluding Yezidi men) is personified in media through three male personalities (two of whom are themselves diaspora Yezidis): e.g. "How Michael Blume became a saviour for Yezidi women from Iraq"<sup>31</sup> (Muschel, 2016); "the psychologist [Kizilhan] who brought 1,100 Yazidi women, raped and tortured by Isis, to Germany for treatment" (Sands, 2015); "This *Man* [Mirza] Helped Save a Thousand Escaped ISIS Slaves in Iraq" (Feldman, 2017).<sup>32</sup> The omnipresent figure of the superman-saviour from the West or diaspora in public presentation of the programme exposes somewhat orientalist conceptions of women's vulnerability, which "depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners [and arguably their diaspora colleagues], a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged" (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 789).

## Conclusion

In critically considering the Baden-Württemberg programme, it is important not to lose sight of the rare and commendable commitment it has made towards the survivors of wartime sexual violence and slavery. Alongside Germany's leading role in the refugee response in recent years, this particular initiative has certainly had positive impacts on the lives of many of the women and children involved. Those in need of medical operations have clearly benefited from

<sup>31</sup> In German: "*Wie Michael Blume zum Retter für Jesidinnen aus dem Irak wurde?*".

<sup>32</sup> I note that such sensationalist headlines may often be given by editors rather than the authors themselves. The trope of glorifying the heroic actions of men in "saving Yezidi women" is also widely reproduced in coverage of the work of smugglers working to free captives from IS, e.g. "Meet the man saving Yazidi slaves from ISIS" (Damon, 2016) and "One Man's Mission to Free Yazidi Women from ISIS" (Ramos, 2016).

treatment unavailable in Iraq, while the children have generally integrated well into the German education system. Much can be learnt from these positive experiences, as well as from the concerns some of the survivors have themselves expressed about the design of the programme.

In some cases, it is clear that the programme has not provided the expected standards of services and care. Perhaps there would have been more scrutiny over inappropriate accommodation, limited freedom of movement and lacking treatment had the programme been implemented through the established actors of the central German state. Taking people into the country without guaranteeing the resources needed to support them, alongside the assumption that simply being in Germany will in itself serve the best interests of the survivors, reflects a somewhat insulting and “infantilising” form of protection. However, assuming that these issues are little more than “teething” problems with a new modality of international protection that has the potential to revolutionise the response to displaced populations, “do[ing] it better and do[ing] it more” (Bokshi, 2013), of greater concern are the patronising attitudes embedded within the programme design and discourse about women’s essentialised vulnerability.

The programme appears to fall into some of the classic traps associated with women’s aid interventions: namely, the lack of a genuine participatory approach, and prevalence of paternalistic presumptions about women’s best interests. This is most obviously exemplified in the involuntary limiting of access to family structures and community support some of the women have experienced in Germany. The categorical exclusion of men (including husbands and adult sons) from participating in the programme is generally unpopular among the female survivors, proving that women-specific experiences of war do not necessarily warrant a women-only response. Moreover, sex-selective protection programmes risk perpetuation of the suffering resulting from IS’s sex-selective persecution of the Yezidis.

Outsiders planning for the survivors according to assumptions about what is in the best interests of the women goes contrary to the “survivor-centred” principle, in which the path to recovery is determined by the survivor herself. Paradoxically, while focusing on supporting vulnerable women and children, this programme exhibits strongly anti-feminist tendencies in its lack of attention to the views of the women themselves. Assuming the presence of adult male relatives as necessarily detrimental to the women’s wellbeing is insulting to both men’s capacity to be supportive husbands/sons and women’s capacity to determine the conditions of their own lives and psychological recovery. The prevalent perception of male refugees as threatening alongside the infantilised association of “womenandchildren” operates a binary gender construction that stigmatises all members of the family, serving well neither the female survivors nor their male relatives left behind.

Taking into account the difficulties associated with running such a programme, and in view of the very varied experiences of participants, there is

clearly need for further reflection on structural design and standards of services, as well as capacities and limitations to support survivors of wartime sexual violence trauma in Baden-Württemberg and elsewhere.

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